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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 003599

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2015

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: DAS YAMAMOTO DISCUSSES INTERNAL
POLITICS, ERITREA AND SOMALIA WITH PM MELES

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: PM Meles told AF DAS Don Yamamoto that Eritrean President Isaias was seeking to prod U.S. action on the border issue through his recent ban on UNMEE helicopter flights. Meles said he did not expect Isaias to attack, but could not afford to allow Ethiopia's election dispute to drag on much longer, lest it "confuse" the Eritrean leader about Ethiopia's vulnerability. Yamamoto said the U.S. would continue to urge opposition leaders to join parliament, but also conveyed high-level USG concerns about arrests of opposition members. Meles claimed that the GOE had shown restraint with the opposition leaders and hoped that many would join Parliament. Other elements of the opposition would have to be "removed," he said. Ethiopian policy in Somalia was directed at supporting the establishment of a government in order to combat Al Qaeda in Mogadishu, the PM indicated. He hoped for greater U.S. cooperation, but understood if U.S. priorities lay elsewhere. DAS Yamamoto told the PM that the USG was taking a fresh look at Somalia and underscored that the U.S. sees Ethiopia as an "anchor state" in the region. In spite of tremendous pressures arising from the ongoing electoral dispute as well as provocative Eritrean harassment of UNMEE, Meles appeared remarkably serene and in control. End Summary.

12. (SBU) AF DAS Don Yamamoto called on Prime Minister Meles October 7. He was accompanied by Charge Vicki Huddleston, AF/E Director Eunice Reddick, Col. Kevin Kenny of AF/RSA and Pol/Econ Counselor (notetaker). MFA Director for North America and Europe Grum Abay and a notetaker joined PM Meles.

Eritrea Border: Isaias Pressuring for Action on Demarcation

13. (C) The only thing stopping Eritrea from attacking Ethiopia was not the U.N. Mission on Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), nor pressure from the international community, but rather President Isaias' belief that "he would die first," Meles said bluntly. "The only chink in our armor is instability in Addis," he added. If Isaias were to be confused by signs of Ethiopian weakness, the PM said, people would die. According to Meles, President Isaias was focused on only one thing: regime survival. The PM observed that 600 Eritreans who would lose their jobs due to the closing of the USAID mission in Asmara were "bit players" in Isaias' drama. The Eritrean president had not yet come to grips with his military defeat in 2000, Meles commented. Isaias was now merely acting like a child trying to get attention.

14. (C) Meles commented that he had modified his own approach to Isaias, from initially trying to "cage" his Eritrean rival completely, to now trying to force him through a single exit from his predicament. "All other doors must remain closed if the President is to come out through the right opening," he concluded. Meles professed not to know for sure how comfortable Isaias' was with the status quo, but he seemed less comfortable every day. The PM cautioned that if the U.S. and international community reacted the wrong way to Isaias' provocation, Ethiopia would pay the cost. Amb. Bolton's response to Eritrea's decision to ban UNMEE helicopter flights, for example, was "the wrong statement at the wrong time." The GOE had remained quiet and restrained, Meles noted. The PM commented that if Eritrea really wanted to get rid of UNMEE, President Isaias would say so directly.

15. (C) DAS Yamamoto conveyed USG anguish over the situation in Asmara. He mentioned that the USG was considering the possibility of offering an American UN envoy to Ethiopia and Eritrea. If the USG decided to put one forward, he added, it would proceed "full-throttle" on the search for peaceful resolution of the long-standing border conflict.

Somalia: GOE Focused on Stopping Al Qaeda in Mogadishu

16. (C) DAS Yamamoto told Meles that the USG had met with Transitional Somali President Yusuf on the margins of the UNGA in September. It had marked the Transitional Federal Government's (TFG's) first such meeting with Washington

policymakers. Yamamoto noted that EU and Ethiopian government had convinced the USG that the TFG might represent the last chance for establishing stability in Somalia. In the New York meeting, USG reps had told TFG representatives that Washington expected them to reach out to other factions and warlords -- at least those who might potentially be supportive. The USG was not opposed to an eventual peacekeeping mission, but only after essential security conditions had been established.

17. (C) Meles replied that "we believe there must be a proactive plan to de-activate Al Qaeda's presence in Mogadishu. "Plan A" for Ethiopia was to encourage the formation of a government so that GOE would have an ally in the fight against Al Qaida. The PM said he thought Ethiopia was acting in concert with the U.S. when it agreed to provide support to the TFG at meetings in Abuja. After the U.S. statement opposing direct Ethiopian military involvement, however, Meles had decided not to invest in "Plan A." "Plan B" was to protect Ethiopia's border with Somalia and maintain contacts with friends in case the U.S. eventually decided to become more proactive. The PM said he understood if Somalia was not a priority for the USG, but remarked that a more robust effort there would not overtax U.S. resources. If the U.S. did decide to get more involved, Meles said the GOE would be ready to go "full throttle" to assist. He added, however, that the GOE no longer had any intention to supply peacekeeping troops for Somalia, even if asked.

18. (C) The U.S. understands that Somalia is a security issue for Ethiopia, Yamamoto replied. He said that U.S. also believed that there might be Al Qaeda cells in Mogadishu and Somaliland, and did see the need for reviewing strategy on Somalia. The U.S. wanted to work with Ethiopia and would try to speed up its own internal assessment and planning process.

Political Crisis: "Disloyal" Opposition Between Parliament
and "Removal"

19. (C) DAS Yamamoto told the PM that Ethiopia's opposition must take up its seats in Parliament. He pledged to make that case to Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) President Hailu Shawel when the latter returned to Ethiopia the next day. Yamamoto stated that Secretary Rice had sent him and his team to Ethiopia to bolster the efforts of the Charge in seeking closure to Ethiopia's post-election disputes and the successful formation of Parliament.

10. (C) Charge Huddleston interjected that all players knew that Ethiopia had reached a critical juncture. The GOE's flexibility had already proved effective in persuading key United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) leaders, and possibly many segments of the CUD, to join the Parliament. It was also important for the GOE to take steps to repair the damage to its reputation from human rights abuses that had occurred since the election. DAS Yamamoto noted that the Secretary was concerned by the large number of what appeared

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to be politically-motivated arrests. He added that he had also cautioned opposition leaders against recourse to violence.

11. (C) The PM replied that he had been pleased by Washington's positive response to Ethiopia's electoral process. He remarked that so long as efforts to democratize in Africa were externally driven, they would not be sustainable. "We've tried to avoid that," he added, and complained about some elements of the international "democracy industry" (note: this was probably a reference to the EU Observer Mission and/or NDI and IRI missions. End note.) He said that democracy and ethnic federalism were matters of survival for Ethiopia, which had to channel dissent and differences in a peaceful, constitutional manner. Meles lamented that Ethiopia had not been blessed with a loyal opposition, and had instead been plagued by remnants of the previous DERG regime. He claimed that the GOE had responded with considerable restraint to provocative and unconstitutional behavior by opposition parties, for which the PM said he had ample evidence. He said he had taken risks in order to preserve democracy and educate the public. "If this opposition proves it is not loyal, however, then removing its leaders will allow something better to grow back." The PM said he thought the opposition was close to entering Parliament, but that the GOE could not let the process drag on beyond the following week, in part due to the dangerous signals that continuing instability sent to Eritrea.

12. (C) DAS Yamamoto urged the PM to reach out more effectively to the Ethiopia Diaspora in Washington, including through Ethiopian Embassy participation in meetings the

Department held with Diaspora groups. While Meles acknowledged that the GOE's outreach efforts had been "weak," and indicated that he planned to revamp his Embassy's programs to engage Ethio-Americans. He asked for patience while his government prepared a new strategy for doing so.

Talks With The OLF: No Intermediaries Needed

113. (C) DAS Yamamoto called the meetings that he would be holding the following week in Washington with exiled leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) discussions, not negotiations. An OLF decision to disarm was "non-negotiable," but was ultimately a matter between the OLF and the GOE. Yamamoto offered the USG's good offices if they would be helpful, and promised that the Department would not issue any statement concerning the discussions.

114. (C) PM Meles said that the recent resumption of discussions with the OLF had originated in a direct exchange of letters between himself and a key OLF leader, and had continued at a meeting in Norway in late summer. The PM noted that the OLF leader was in touch with other organization leaders in Asmara, and that the GOE also had direct contact with the Asmara wing of the OLF. The Government of Norway had offered to facilitate the discussions, but Meles said he had declined the offer, preferring to keep the talks private. Meles said he planned to ask for USG help when appropriate, and welcomed U.S. meetings with OLF leaders. He indicated that the OLF had put forth a new approach in its dialogue with the GOE that had some merits, but the winding down of the armed struggle would also have to be addressed. One positive development was that most of the organization no longer demanded independence for the Oromiya region.

Ethiopia: Anchor State, Partner and Good Customer

115. (C) DAS Yamamoto told PM Meles that the USG continued to view Ethiopia as an anchor state. "What happens here affects the whole region," he said. He also thanked Meles for Ethiopia's contribution of peacekeeping troops to Burundi. Finally, he expressed the USG's appreciation for the GOE's steadfastness in purchasing Boeing aircraft in the face of tremendous pressure from European Governments on behalf of Airbus.

116. (C) COMMENT: The discussion between PM Meles and DAS Yamamoto reflected the broad strategic interests that are encompassed within the Ethio-American bilateral relationship. In spite of tremendous pressures arising from the ongoing electoral dispute as well as provocative Eritrean harassment of UNMEE, Meles appeared remarkably serene and in control of the situation.

117. (SBU) DAS Yamamoto did not have the opportunity to clear this message.
HUDDLESTON